

The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic
Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow (editors)

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Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow's edited book is the most recent and, I suspect, the most complete contribution to a comprehensive study of the Southern Gothic. The volume's most important contribution to a substantial amount of works written on Southern Gothic is two-fold: on the one hand, it is a sort of 'cartography' of the genre; on the other hand, it shows the complex and contradictory nature of Southern Gothic in literature and, in a much smaller part, cinema and television. The whole volume is unified by an ambitious purpose: it aims to compile almost every possible subject concerning Southern Gothic and explain each one thoroughly, giving the reader an updated compilation of the topics that have constituted the genre throughout the years, and still do, and have raised debates about it. This book is therefore a must-have for scholars working not only on the gothic, but also on broader aspects of American literature and culture. The editors' introduction gives the reader a clear sense of what the book is and does; moreover, this volume has 36 chapters and at the end of several chapters (not all) there is a brief section devoted to further reading, which is especially helpful to scholars. The essays are classified into five main parts: 'Edgar Allan Poe and His Legacy', 'Space and Place in Southern Gothic', 'Race and Southern Gothic', 'Gender and Sexuality in Southern Gothic Texts', 'Monsters, Vampires, and Voodoo'. These five categories serve as receptacles for almost every possible topic present in Southern Gothic, and more specifically its literary aspects. It is quite regrettable that, due to the 505 pages that comprise the volume, this review will only be able to give a detailed consideration of a small number of essays within the collection, those which, in my own opinion, stand out as being particularly representative of Southern Gothic issues.

In Part I, Tom F. Wright opens his essay 'Edgar Allan Poe and the Southern Gothic' by recognizing that a number of issues (such as the concern with frontier, political utopianism and the spectre of race) still exist in the form they do because of his enormous influence. Most importantly, Wright suggests that 'thinking about Poe in terms of the Southern Gothic

helps us to disrupt periodisation, assists us in perceiving the complex precursors to the twentieth-century Southern literary revival, and allows us to reflect on the limitations of the very term itself' (10). In her essay, 'Southern Gothic: Haunted Houses', Carol Margaret Davison recognizes that, while the trope of the haunted house is rooted in the European gothic tradition, it has developed a distinctly American resonance since Poe first described the House of Usher. Davison explores the trope from Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) and Thomas Nelson Page's 'No Haid Pawn' (1887) to William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* (1995), showing that the haunted house is to be considered as an uncanny space where racialized and gendered bodies, the past and the present collide. In the last essay of the section, 'The Globalisation of the Southern Gothic', Edward Sugden argues that the most prominent feature of Southern Gothic is not repression but spatial compression, 'where certain forces, some global, are compressed into concentrated, only marginally visible, but structurally central forms' (79).

This statement serves as a useful introduction to Part II, the largest section of the volume, where space and place are the focus of debate. Here we have an extraordinarily interesting cultural cartography of Southern Gothic. This cartography starts from the swamp, or bayou, a cultural signifier that served 'as a shorthand for the various miseries of the Southern experience, especially slavery' (Matthew Wynn Sivils, 'Gothic Landscapes of the South', 88). Then we have the 'Gothic Appalachia' (Sarah Robertson), where the stereotypically violent and uncivilized hillbilly and the environmental disasters turn the Appalachian Gothic into a politicized genre, and Appalachia into a site of both exploitation and resistance. This mapping continues with the 'Shadows in the Sunshine State' in 'Florida Gothic', where Bev Hogue explores the spaces 'where sunshine blinds unwitting characters to the presence of underlying mystery and menace' (149), and ends with the 'Gothic Cuba and the Trans-American South in Louisa May Alcott's 'M.L.''' (Ivonne M. García). The section ends with three essays devoted to New Orleans, the 'gothic capital' of America. In her essay, 'New Orleans as Gothic Capital', Sherry R. Truffin underlines the exotic 'otherness' of the city, with its unusual colonial history and its 'excess, masquerade, trickery, and disorienting juxtapositions: the beautiful and the monstrous, the refined and the crass, the sacred and the profane, the living and the dead' (187), from the first colonial settlements to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Part III elaborates upon the close ties that Southern Gothic has with issues surrounding racial difference. To be sure, race is a motif that underlies every chapter of the volume, a point made by Street and Crow in the introductory chapter (4). Nevertheless, this section focuses on specific features of this particular issue, from the Southern plantation as uncanny space (Michael Kreyling, 'Uncanny Plantations: The Repeating Gothic') to the gothic representations of Haitian Revolution and the African American appropriations of the Gothic in slave narratives (Maisha Wester, 'Slave Narratives and Slave Revolts'). The last chapter of the section, Eric Gary Anderson's 'Raising the Indigenous Undead', represents an interesting (almost unique) occasion to remember that African Americans are not the only group who have experienced racial oppression in the South. Native Southern ghost and monster narratives 'typically eschew or downplay Euro-American gothic conventions – and, surprisingly often, fear itself – in favor of haunts that foster anti-colonial critique as well as Indigenous community' (324).

In Part IV the essay 'Twisted Sisters: The Monstrous Women of Southern Gothic' by Kellie Donovan-Condrón highlights the representations of the 'monstrous feminine' and the female grotesque in Southern Gothic texts, from Poe's Madeleine Usher to Faulkner's quartet, Miss Emily Grierson ('A Rose for Emily'), Miss Rosa Coldfield, Judith Sutpen and Clytemnestra ('Clytie') (*Absalom, Absalom!*). If, as Teresa Goddu has famously observed, the Southern setting functions as a 'safety valve' to vent the unacceptable aspects of American history (T.A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, history, and nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 76), then Southern female characters embody the consequences of America's historical and societal sins. The issues of gender and sexuality presented in the section are a useful exploration of this embodiment.

Part V is a somewhat 'residual' section, focused on Southern monsters that can be considered as a staple of American culture in general. Southern monsters are the haunting manifestations of conflicting anxieties about race, class, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, and politics. This section traces a sort of unique history of America, one that illustrates how the creation of the monstrous 'other' reflects society's fears, past and present. Ken Gelder's fascinating essay, 'Southern Vampires: Anne Rice, Charlaine Harris and *True Blood*', identifies Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* as a 'plantation gothic' novel, and argues that the vampires in Harris' Southern Vampire Mysteries and in *True Blood* 'capture this sense that the South is everything that mainstream America is *not*' (p. 413). Anne Schroder's 'Voodoo and Conjure as Gothic Realism' deals with the figure of the zombie, which is best

understood in the colonial and postcolonial mode, and says as much about American fears as it does about any Haitian or Southern reality. The two last chapters deal with television and cinema, respectively. Brigid Cherry's 'Shadows on the Small Screen: The Televisuality and Generic Hybridity of Southern Gothic' analyses television series such as *Carnivale*, *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *True Detective* and *American Horror Story Coven*, showing that 'all these series draw on the history, concerns and identity of the South, as well as the themes of Southern Gothic and grotesque writing, as intertexts' (471). David Greven's 'The Southern Gothic in Film: An Overview' focuses on the politically Janus faced cinematic Southern Gothic: on the one hand, it has the capacity to speak for the marginalized; on the other hand, 'Southern Gothic works exploitatively and simplistically [to] relegate the South and its denizens to the category of degenerate and menacing otherness' (475).

As all of these sections and essays imply, there are several crossroads in Southern studies, from that of pluralizing regional and generic identification into a more fragmented – even contradictory – understanding of what 'Southern' and 'Gothic' mean to a different understanding of the traditional ways class and ethnicity are viewed in the South, or of the ways Southern stereotypes of gender and sexuality are being challenged (a point made by Street and Crow in the introductory chapter). For those willing to accept this challenge, this is, consequently, an invaluable collection of essays covering an ample range of topics, from the origins to the legacies of Southern Gothic. As such, the volume is a 'must' for current and future specialists in Southern Gothic, a field that still has enormous scope for further exploration.